

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

Edwin Pope Thayer (1925-1933)



He loved to tell the folks back home in Indianapolis the story about the Senate calendar — a story that he probably did not tell very often around the Senate. It had to do with his "tricking" the Senate into authorizing a veterans' hospital for that city. Here is how one reporter remembered that tale. "As secretary of the Senate, he prepared the calendar each week, always placing the bill to establish the hospital at the top of the list. Finally, a senator was reported to have said, 'Let's pass the bill and get it out of the way.' The bill was passed."

Edwin Pope Thayer cared a great deal about his fellow war veterans. Not only had he served in the Spanish-American War as a regimental commander with Indiana's 158th Volunteers, but he had then continued for another twelve years as a colonel in his state's national guard. It was particularly fitting that he should count as his greatest public contribution the establishment of that veterans' hospital, which opened in 1932.

Thayer was born on December 15, 1864, in the Indianapolis suburb of Greenfield, where the "Hoosier Poet" James Whitcomb Riley edited the local newspaper. After high school, Thayer traveled forty miles from home to enroll in DePauw University. The first person he met on campus was [James E. Watson](#). He and Watson became roommates and, after graduating in 1886, remained close friends for the rest of their lives. Thayer joined his father's business in his hometown, while Watson went off to law school. While Thayer was serving in the Spanish-American War, Watson was serving in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Watson, who attended his first Republican National Convention as a twelve-year-old in 1876, encouraged Thayer to become active in Republican political circles. In 1904 Thayer won appointment as chief assistant to the national convention's sergeant at arms. He held on to that post for the next three national conventions and, in 1920, took over the job of convention sergeant at arms.

In 1916, James Watson won election to the U.S. Senate. A firm isolationist, he helped block President Woodrow Wilson's war measures early in 1917 and was among the

senators who triggered the president's infamous blast: "The Senate of the United States is the only legislative body in the world which cannot act when its majority is ready for action. A little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible." At the close of World War I, Watson became Republican Majority Leader [Henry Cabot Lodge](#)'s point man in his successful campaign to defeat ratification of the Treaty of Versailles.

When Secretary of the Senate George Sanderson died unexpectedly in April 1925, "Sunny Jim" Watson nominated the Indiana businessman to take his place. Well known and widely admired by members of the Senate Republican Conference, Thayer had recently been assisting in efforts to resolve two contested Senate elections. On December 5, 1925, the sixty-year-old Hoosier won the unanimous endorsement of the Republican Conference and two days later he won election as the thirteenth person to serve as secretary.

Shortly after Thayer moved into his Capitol quarters, he discovered in the financial clerk's safe the Senate's copy of President [James Monroe](#)'s 1823 message to Congress. This message included the text of Secretary of State [John Quincy Adams](#)' warning that the United States would no longer tolerate interference by European powers in Western Hemisphere affairs. What Thayer had found was an original copy of the "Monroe Doctrine." This discovery sparked his interest in preserving additional old Senate records that he learned were scattered throughout numerous Capitol basement storerooms.

Secretary Thayer directed Senate file clerk Harold Hufford, a young George Washington University law student from his hometown of Greenfield, to inventory these records. Senator [Robert C. Byrd](#) later described the outcome of Thayer's assignment. "From that day on, the preservation of the Senate's records became both an obsession and a career for Harold Hufford. Each day he would go about his regular duties as a filing clerk for the secretary of the Senate and attend law school classes, but, in every free moment, he would search out Senate documents and haul them up to the Senate attic." In a recent catalog describing the National Archives' "Treasures of Congress" exhibition, the twenty-ninth secretary of the Senate, Gary Sisco, saluted Thayer and Hufford for their diligence in organizing these priceless records. Secretary Sisco noted that when the newly opened National Archives notified the Senate in 1937 that it was ready to receive its noncurrent records, those records were ready for transfer and Hufford moved with the records to become the first director of the Archives' legislative section.

In March 1929, the Senate Republican Conference elected James Watson as its chairman and as Senate majority leader. Now the former college roommates could work in tandem as majority leader and secretary. Thayer had every reason to look forward to satisfying days ahead. Then, on October 24, the stock market collapsed and the Great Depression followed. By June 1932, Thayer and Watson confronted the specter of thousands of destitute World War I veterans massing in silent vigil on the Capitol grounds in a futile attempt to influence Senate passage of legislation for an immediate veterans' bonus.

In November 1932, voters blamed Republicans for the economic hard times and returned the Senate to Democratic control. James Watson lost his seat and Edwin Thayer lost his secretaryship. After he retired from the Senate, on March 4, 1933, Thayer returned to his home in Greenfield. He died on February 1, 1943, in the veterans' hospital he had helped establish more than a decade earlier.

Senator James Watson, by then known as "Old Jim," survived Thayer by five years. Unlike the former secretary, he remained in Washington, although he rarely failed to visit his great friend on trips back home. Described by a reporter as "a huge shaggy-haired, sharp-eyed old man with an unfailing hail-fellow-well-met for everyone and an unflagging interest in politics," Watson became a regular visitor to the Senate's chamber and cloakrooms, where he loved to talk with senior senators about old times. He died in 1948 and now lies in Washington's Cedar Hill Cemetery, at last separated from his old college roommate.